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FIVE MEN AND POMPEY

A Series of Dramatic Portraits

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STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

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LAODICE AND DANAË

Play in Verse

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IMAGES—OLD AND NEW

Poems

By *Richard Aldington*

THE ENGLISH TONGUE AND OTHER POEMS

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FIVE MEN AND POMPEY

Dramatic Portraits

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FIVE MEN AND POMPEY

A Series of Dramatic Portraits

BY

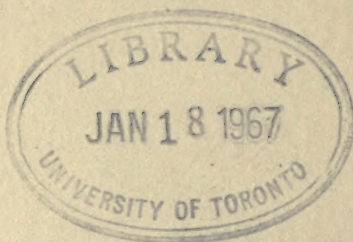
STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT



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THE LAST BANQUET

THE LAST BANQUET

[SERTORIUS SPEAKS. B. C. 72]

Twelve years! Twelve years of striving! and at last
My power is—secure? Still Pompey lives
And has an army and Metellus strives
To wipe out his defeats. The net is cast:
Cast, and draws ever tighter: and my men
Grumble and mutter, near to mutiny.
Perpenna stirs up treason: like a fen
Of black and quaking marshes, my own camp
Boils up all foulness, gapes to swallow me.
The black death-chariot waits, the coursers stamp—
Yet I have made a law, have curbed the tribes,
Built up a senate, founded schools, withstood
For twelve long years the iron arm of Rome.
I have not spared my time, my gold, my blood.
And now all vanishes in plots and gibes—
I love this warm, brown land; it is my home.
And yet—to see the Forum once again!
Ah, Nydia! Nydia! Had you not died
I could have crossed the Alps, have crushed these men,
These unclean vultures, tearing at Rome's side;
I could have brought back the Republic—then.
You died. I still fight on, but I am old.
Pompey is young, and though I beat him now,
He will be victor, as the end will show.

Ah, Plancus, enter! Is the night so cold
That you need shroud yourself in that great cloak?
You too, Perpenna, Cimon, you who broke
So bravely through the foe, you fear a draught?
Be seated, friends!

My comrades, we have laughed
And feasted for an hour together, yet
I have not told you why I summoned thus
My ten most trusted leaders to this feast.
Now is the time! I shall discharge the debt.
Glorious tidings come from out the East!
And Mithridates hurries aid to us—
Let not that goblet fall I pray thee, friend!—
Ah! Dog and traitor! So this was your end!
Guards! Guards!—I think you will not rise again,
Perpenna, from that blow! Guards! Ho there, men!
A-a-ah! Thank you, Pompey! No, you will not take
Me back to grace your triumph: they have done
Their work too well, your friends. My sands are run.
And you have burst all barriers left to break
That shielded the Republic. It is dead.

Not with a pomp of banners,
Not with a flare of spears,
Not with mourning or head downcast
The great Republic dies at last;
A sword in the heart and the hands bound fast,
Dead in the wreck of the years!

Pompey, Pompey, chief of pride,
Hero and lord of Rome!
You ride to a gallant triumph now,
Gay as the green and fruitful bough;
But the bough will be withered and dry enow
When you ride for the last time home!

Pompey, Pompey, laugh while you may!
Laugh as Polycrates laughed!
But ever, when life is most glorious,
I bid you think of Sertorius,
Of how he rode forth victorious,
And how he was slain by craft.

I have been slain by great lords;
But a slave shall strike you down,
A slave shall strike you down from behind,
And your strength shall fail, and your sight go blind,
And your body a nameless grave shall find,
You, that strove for a crown!

Pompey, Pompey, turn where you may!
You shall get but little ease.
For whether on sea or whether on land,
One picture shall ever before you stand—
A man struck down on a barren strand—
A head hacked off by the seas!

Pompey, Pompey, go where you will,
Double and turn again!
One thought shall you know till you lie in your grave;

A thought not even your soul can brave!—
The thought of a mean and evil slave,
And a knife that was forged in Spain!

So the Republic dies! and all my work
Is vain; the things I built are shattered now,
My task is done, the task I dared not shirk;
And I am very tired. Nydia, come!
Come as you came that day down the green walk,
The day I rode in triumph back to Rome,
After the Cimbri had been crushed—and talk,
Talk as we talked that day beside the pool,
Shadowed by ilex, where the golden hearts
Of lilies burned within the water cool,—
Nydia! But she stays not, she departs!
The marble seat—you lifted up your face—
I have fought long now. I am weary. Come!
Nydia! Nydia! and lead me home!
Home! How the Forum blazes in the sun!
The Roman faces and the kindly speech;
The melon-sellers, proffering to each
That comes, ripe, green-streaked melons—What! you
shun

An old friend, Balbus? No! It was not I!
No! by the gods! I never gave consent
To those red days of massacre!—They cry!
Oh gods! they cry, cry, they are not yet dead!
They *will* not die: they hurl upon my head
Curses and prayers! I hear them in my tent!
They are not dead! Oh gods! They are not dead!
I never gave consent!

Still the time slips
And Nydia comes not. I am very tired.
The things are broken to which I aspired,
And you alone are left. Love! She is here
Nydia, Nydia.....

LUCULLUS DINES—

LUCULLUS DINES—

[59 B. C.]

I dine in the Apollo room tonight,
With Cicero and Pompey! See to it!

Cicero! Pompey! But ten years ago
Lucullus was the hero, Conqueror
Of Mithridates, Rescuer of Rome!
All 's Pompey now; he goes far—and has gone;
And, with it all, is just the honest, brave,
Young captain that I saw that hot, raw, day;
The first day of my shame. Oh gods, gods, gods!
Must Rome have always victories, victories,
Incredible conquests till the whole world reels,
And still thrust traps into my path until
I fall at last?

When Pompey came I knew.

Oh he was kind, quite kind, considerate
Of the old bitter man there who had failed,
Recalled without a triumph! He was kind
In all his splendid, conquering, strength and youth!
Yet, I had beaten Mithridates. So
Let the old lion growl through teeth once sharp!
This sordid squabble of a vulgar crowd
Of stiff patricians, ranting demagogues,
Serves well for others. I, I have my trees,

My cherries, rooted firm in Roman soil,
Shedding a delicate whiteness on the hills
When spring comes. A far greater triumph that
Than all my conquests.

Yes, they know me well,
These young men, "That old dragon on the hill,
Who gives such gorgeous dinners. Gods, his wines!
Fit for Apollo!"

Yes, an excellent host,
Learned in sauces, skilled in oysters, game;
Within whose heart no spark of ancient fire
Burns on. . . . Oh Power! Power! Once to lead
An army, once again, and see the thick
Rain of the Parthian arrows and the blaze
As forty brazen cohorts broke the foe!
The thin lines buckle, the black masses fly!
Imperator Romanus!

No, Lucullus,
But the good host who—plants his cherry-trees!

Love? I have loved once, once. . . . That awful day
We stormed in through the gates of Amisus. . . .
The loot-mad soldiers, howling, smote the town
Down in a mud of blood and dirt and wine,
Bodies and gold and priceless tapestries.
Half-mad I rushed to stop them, beat and struck;
I think they would have murdered me at once,
But that one drunkard yelled "The General!
Lower your swords, lads! Sir, we won this town!
You take your pleasures and let us take ours!"
I reeled into the blackness of an arch,

And saw before me, white-robed, laurel-crowned,
Just such a maiden as might once have danced
Along the friezes of the Parthenon;
A face like that on an old silver coin,
Demetrius sent me, clear-cut, beautiful
With all the burning beauty of the Greek.
Pure and serene her grey eyes gazed in mine. . . .
We spoke few words; what need to speak at all
When just our eyes told all we had to tell,
There in the soft, cool blackness, splashed with light
From the red pools of burning wine without?

Few words. They chime like little silver bells
Within my heart now, or like trumpet blasts
Bear up my soul a little towards the gods.

We had three years. She died before my fall.

I thought of love as a crooked knife,
As a soft and passionate lord;
Born when the kings' beards dipped in wine
And the gold cups clashed on the board.
But my love came like a blast of cold,
A straight, clean, sword.

I thought of love as a secret thing,
For an hour of incensed ease,
When breast and breast together cling,
Under sweet-scented trees.
My love is all good-comradeship,
More great than these.

I thought of love as a toy for a day,
Soon to be overpassed ;
Light and frail as a hollow shell,
That into the brook is cast.
My love holds while the earth endures,
And the suns stand fast.

I thought of love as mixed with earth,
One with the bloom of the sods.
My love is air and wine and fire,
Breaker of metes and rods,
A slender javelin tipped with light,
Hurled at the gods.

Life lies before me like a platter of coins.
"Here are the new ones ! Mark the choice design !"
All cry : for me the others fade and dim,
And one alone shines clear, an old Greek coin
Demetrius sent me and that lovely face

Pompey would say that I am growing old,
And Cicero would turn a phrase with me
In his next great oration, as a type
Of the old fool who mumbles of days past.

Meanwhile I have my orchards—and my feasts.
Those turbot now ; the sauce is very good,
A peacock's breast is good, too, at this time,
With other things, as——old Falernian,
Tarentine oysters, and sweet wines from Thrace

Tarentine oysters and sweet wines from Thrace.

THE FORLORN CAMPAIGN

THE FORLORN CAMPAIGN

[CRASSUS IN PARTHIA. B. C. 53]

Go then, Valerius. Let the legions know,
That I will answer this new embassy
Within the hour. . . . They will mutiny,
If I refuse these terms. . . . What shall I do?
What shall I do? The trap is plain enough
To me; but they, they only see the rough,
Long road and the red, ever-circling cloud
Of horsemen, raining arrows on them there.
Gods! And the mountains are so near, so near!
Scarce three days march. . . . that we shall never make.

I boasted once. The gods like not the proud.
And I shall die in this red waste of sand,
Though my heart tremble and my stiff limbs shake.
A thousand slaves bowed down at my command;
I lived in ivory palaces of delight;
I ruled an empire. . . . here is all my might;
An old and wearied man in a bare tent,
Whence, presently, I shall go out to die.

How they will rage at Rome! Each will outvie
The next in fury: none will dare lament.
Caesar will listen with a little smile,
A smile like two blue ice-cliffs as they part,

Slow-rising from the deep caves of his heart.
Pompey will bow his great gold head awhile,
And say, "He died a Roman. It is well."
Perhaps be sad, a little. For the rest,
That yelping pack of nobles, they will howl
How, "Crassus was a madman at the best,
And in this last attempt, a blind old owl,
A drink-crazed miser with a wooden sword.
He blundered here and here! His whole campaign
Was one great blunder!" So with one accord,
They howl.

To praise is hard, easy to damn.
I failed in this. Some other will succeed.

Yet they are right, in part. That day, far back,
When by the borderline I checked my steed. . . .
Our spies had said the Parthian army lay
Encamped near by and ready for the fray.
We found no army; nothing but a track,
Thousands of footprints stamped in the red sand,
Where a great host had passed. A sudden fear
Seized on the legions and on every hand
The men shrank back. . . . No foe stood anywhere,
Nothing but scarlet sand and brassy sky,
And men aghast at signs traced on the ground,
A ring of white, scared faces, without sound.

Then afterwards, there came that burning march
Under a sky of flame, continually.
Our very armor seemed to shrink and parch
Beneath that sun; our tongues grew swelled and black;

And ever circling, circling, front and back,
The Parthians galloped in a cloud of dust.
They would not turn and fight but slew us thus.
Their bitter arrows came like hail on us.
Our strongest dropped and died without a blow.
Then, beyond Carrhæ, trusting in our woe,
They turned at last and stood to wait our thrust.
But two things I remember of that fight.
How Publius went out—the burning light
Smote on his armor, turning it to gold,
Save where, a sunset cloud, his red cloak rolled;
And in his face was joy and keen delight,
Youth and a boy's high heart and great resolves....
A golden knight he stood, a golden knight....
He rides away, the crimson cloud dissolves....

One other picture burns within my brain,
Like white-hot sand; and will burn now until
I go into the trap tonight.... Again
The dust cloud rose, and from a little hill
I saw the sheen of spearheads at its rim,
And near the rim a spot of black that grew,
Grew, grew, till earth and sky alike were dim;
For there was nought but it in earth and sky....
Nought but a black, dead, face.... a face I knew....
The lips were bloody.... down upon the pike
Dripped long slow drops like tears... I hear them now,
Gathering, hanging... Gods! they strike and strike!...
Dripping forever on my naked heart....
Great tears of blood.... Once, very long ago,
I had a son.... How glad he seemed to start

On that attack! . . . No . . no . . I shall go mad!
I must not think how glad he was! . . how glad . .

We fell back towards the mountains. Cassius took
Another way. He may be slain or safe,
I know not; for myself, my legions chafe
And mutiny. I die here. But as I look
So close to death, I see that what I strove
To do will yet be done and Rome shall rule
Forever o'er the bloody road I clove.
I break . . . but she will find another tool.

Ere the first sword was sharpened and the first trumpet
blown
Rome looked upon the new-made lands and marked
them for her own!
Ere the first ship was timbered and the first rudder
hung
Rome held the oceans in her hands, splendid and stern
and young!

The wild tribes bend before her, the kings are over-
thrown,
The purple empires of the East before her feet fall
down.
From strange barbaric countries her captains bring her
spoil,
Treasures of gems and ivory, spices and wines and oil.
Wheat grows for her in Egypt; for her the Greek
scribes write,

For her the diver dares the shark, the fowler scales the
height,

To feed her great arenas the bold beast-tamer quakes
Among the tawny lions or the hissing pits of snakes.

Her legions march in Asia, they tramp through
Farthest Gaul,

In Greece their horns blow up the dawn, in Spain they
stand a wall.

And still upon her Seven Hills Rome rules the seas and
tides,

The earth and all that in it is, while that stern strength
abides.

Hail for the last time, Mother! Your sons stand here
at bay.

Still you have sons for conquest. We fall the Roman
way!

Our cheers still ringing, our short swords drawn,
We die here singing, but Rome, Rome goes on!

Ah! Yes, Valerius, I will answer them.

Comrades! I know these terms are but a trap:
Yet I would rather die by Parthian swords
Than Roman.

After I am dead push on,
Straight to the mountains; once the heights are won,
You can defy at last these swarming hordes.
Break camp at once to guard against mishap.

Farewell! Valerius is your general now.

Up there, you say, upon that hillock's brow
They wait? . . . Yes, I can see the glint of steel. . . .

AD ATTICUM

AD ATTICUM

[CICERO. 48 B. C.]

How hot it is! Faint waves of heat steam up
From the burnt sand without, like threads of glass,
Blurring the vision. In the dark, cool rooms
Within, all are asleep, and not a sound
Breaks the tense stillness... Why should I not sleep?
This letter here, to Atticus, can wait....
No! I had better write it now, this court
Is cool enough, the plashing fountain pleasant,
Stylus and tablets on the table there...
Let me begin!... Where did I buy this style?
Oh yes, at Patras, where we had to leave
Poor Tiro sick—well, he is better now—
And, Jupiter be thanked! I have escaped
Safely from that accursed province! Gods!
Now, even now, the names ring in my brain,
The petty lawsuits which I must adjudge,
The protests from the people, stricken down
Under a shameful load of usury,
Oppressed by every Roman thief that crept
Into some petty office. Gods, those trials!
They made me old before my time. That case
Between Valerius and Volusius!
And Brutus, the immaculate, with his interest
Of forty-eight per cent!

What shall I say

To Atticus? "Caesar and I are friends."
Or, "Next week I shall sail from Formia
And seek out Pompey."

There they stand, gouged plain
On the smooth wax. I rub them both out—so!

Caesar, which shall I write? I was your friend.
Pompey has helped me always. Over all
Stands Rome. This war I hate as I hate Hell,
And yet must take one side. . . . You made the war,
Caesar. . . and the Republic perishes,
If you are victor. . . That one fact ends all.
Rome will be better ruled? There 's something more
Than better rule, something for which men die.
May I have grace to die so at the end,
Grace to pursue my vision to the last,
Though all my body is one sweat of blood;
Grace to reach up and touch her garment's hem
And see her smile down in that last, black place
Where the swords fall. I shall be happy then.
All heaven and earth will be repaid to me,
In that one glance, before the swords sweep down.

Life is a dream and a rapture, life is a voice and a
breath,
A gust of wind and a darkness, puffed in the face of
Death,
Life is a treacherous river, a house that sinks in the
sand,
A gift that poisons the giver, a ring that withers the
hand.

Yet, when a man is mighty, that dream is more than
the truth,
That wailing wind in the darkness more bright than the
fires of youth,
The ring gives wisdom and power, the house stands up
like a rock,
The river roars from the mountains, and his foemen
reel at its shock.

These are our mighty fellows, we are akin to these,
The men who burn on the deserts, who drown in the
pathless seas,
Not for gold or for power or gems some king has
thieved,
But simply to follow a vision, to see a dream achieved!

So, though we stand beleaguered, though the foe comes
on like the sea,
Though slaves fall down as he passes, and helot bend
at his knee,
Though there is no escaping, though the last hope is
gone,
Here in the sight of all men we buckle our armor on!

Whatever chances, Tullia is safe;
I only risk myself . . . and so, at last,
I shall begin my letter . . . yet I wonder
If, after this, I shall see Formia
Ever again . . . No need to think of that!
Tullia will be safe . . . and Atticus;

But, for the rest—I have lost many friends.
Already...Bah! Come, let me get to work!...
Tullia will be safe.....Hail, Atticus!

DE BELLO CIVILI

DE BELLO CIVILI

[CAESAR. 49 B. C.]

More letters? Lay them down here.

Antony,

Curio, Cicero—even Atticus—

Well, what does Antony say, "Strike quick and hard!
March your picked Gauls on Rome!" H'm? "All the
city

Is gone stark mad against you." Oh, of course!

"At the next meeting of the Senate"? Ah!

"I will suggest both you and Pompey lay
Aside your several commands." All hangs
On that one offer—If they should refuse,
I strike at last!..

Well, Curio, "Dare you not
Give up the provinces? All would be well.
It is the one thing Pompey now demands—
Impossible of course—" Gods, Curio!
"Give up the provinces"! For twenty years
I have toiled up this hill—and now at last
Stand here, proconsul of a barren land,
A swarming, seething pot of plots and lies,
Where every day brings forth a fresh revolt.
Others had rich lands in the peaceful East,
They fought with armies, I a people. Now,
After nine years these Gauls are not subdued.

I stand alone against a forest fire . . .
But even this they will not suffer, no,
Not even that I waste my life in vain
In these vast woods. They call me to return,
"A private citizen as Pompey did."
No, to return disgraced, shut out forever
From all great deeds. . . .

What say you, Cicero?

"I know you do not want a civil war."

H'm. "Rome mistaken—" H'm. "Why should you
care

For all these dogs that bark at great men's heels?

You say your foes are wrong—It may be so,
At least they act with one thought in their minds,
That you wish civil war for your own ends.

Why not disprove them, strike them dumb, resign
Your provinces!" and let them cut my throat!

"Return to Rome a citizen. That one act
Would make you just—immortal, and they, they,
Would shrink back to their holes, never again
To dare the splendor of the day and truth.

Pompey is not against you. Him I know.

And he would be as generous a friend

As you could wish—resign his legions too—"

Ah, Cicero!—What's this, here at the end?

"Remember the Republic! Caesar, Caesar!

Gaze not in that Medusa's face. Your soul
Stands here at stake, you hold the fate of Rome
In your two hands. Gaze not in that dread face!"

Another letter! What...from Calinus...

How our lives part...and men part...Why the last
Time that I saw him was...how long ago..
Ten...twenty years... on the white walls of Rhodes
We talked that evening on the flat, wide roof
Of the old merchant's house where he was lodged.
I was to leave tomorrow, and we lay
Under the blazing stars. A brown slave girl
Plucked at a lute whose drowsy murmur died
Throbblingly into sweetness...We were young
And all our gorgeous dreams marched forth in state
Past the great purple bales of Syrian rugs,
Over the thin brown frails of dates, until
The skies were full of color, great broad bands...
Crimson like pigeon's blood, blue like the sea,
Yellow like old, old ivory...The stars waned.
Next day we parted. Friend, friend of my youth,
What have you now to say? Today I make
The last decision, take one course of two,
Be saved or lost...friend...friend...friend of my
youth...

"Caesar, the swords are ready,
The swords you have tempered long,
War and peace are held in your hand,
You stand at length where you longed to stand;
By civil war you would heal a land,
And by wrong you would better a wrong.

Power and Strength and Empire,
These are full mighty words.
One thing, men's Freedom, is higher than all.

And better a hut though it totter and fall,
A broken temple, a ruined wall,
Than a land subdued by your swords!

We have walked for a time together.
The roads fork and we part.
I follow my Lady of beauty and grace,
Drunk with the light of her glorious face,
And you, you go to your own place:
And a poison breeds in your heart.

I go with the Republic.
The Empire stands by your side.
You love her now. In a time not far
You will look in your heart where your dead
 hopes are,
And curse her for a lamia,
The serpent you called bride.

We part. Our ways are far henceforth.
Henceforth our speech is with spears,
I curse you not. Strive on for your prize
Till the last thick darkness covers your eyes
And the voice of the dead Republic cries
Forever in your ears.

Follow your foe o'er land and sea,
River and bush and stone!
When the end has come to the weary race
And the slain man lies in his fated place,
You shall draw the veil from the white dead face,
And shriek, knowing your own!"

Calinus..Calinus..To be saved or lost..
What! Curio and Antony are without?
Curio! Antony! Welcome!..What..you say
They drove you from the Senate?..I must make
Decision now...

Comrades! The die is cast!
We march tomorrow on Ariminum!

AFTER PHARSALIA

AFTER PHARSALIA

[POMPEY. 48 B. C.]

So it is over ; you have won at last,
And our long struggle ends and with it Rome,
The Rome that was the glory of the past,
Whose stripped fleets ruled the seas, shaking the foam
From their proud prows. They brought a freedom then.
Freedom and the Republic. Once. No more.

Well, it was fated, my most trusted men
Failed me at need ; as your chiefs will fail you,
O Caesar ! You I neither fear nor hate.
We strove not with each other but with fate.
Your followers will ruin what you do ;
Since you are honest, and will strive to make
New laws and found an Empire, which, at least,
Gives Justice equally to all. The stake
Is high. They have sat long now at their feast,
With Rome their pig-trough. They will conquer you ;
A hundred dwarfs, pulling a giant down.
The problem is too great, the time not ripe
For its solution.

We have fought, we two !
For the Republic I, you for your crown,
Each one of his own cause the very type.

Though both of us have failed, your cause yet rules,
Your Empire.

Any fool can govern fools.
To make fools rule themselves and do it well,
That is the task. If you could rule forever,
Caesar...but little men will seize your work,
Your great machine. There 's where the paths dis sever!
And Rome roars blindly down amid the murk
To swift destruction....

Still one chance remains
Where my disbanded legions fill the plains
Of Egypt. A bare chance. If that fails too,
Why, "Here lies Cnæus Pompey, called the Great,
He fought for the Republic, loved his wife,
And climbed the ladder of swords that men call Life."

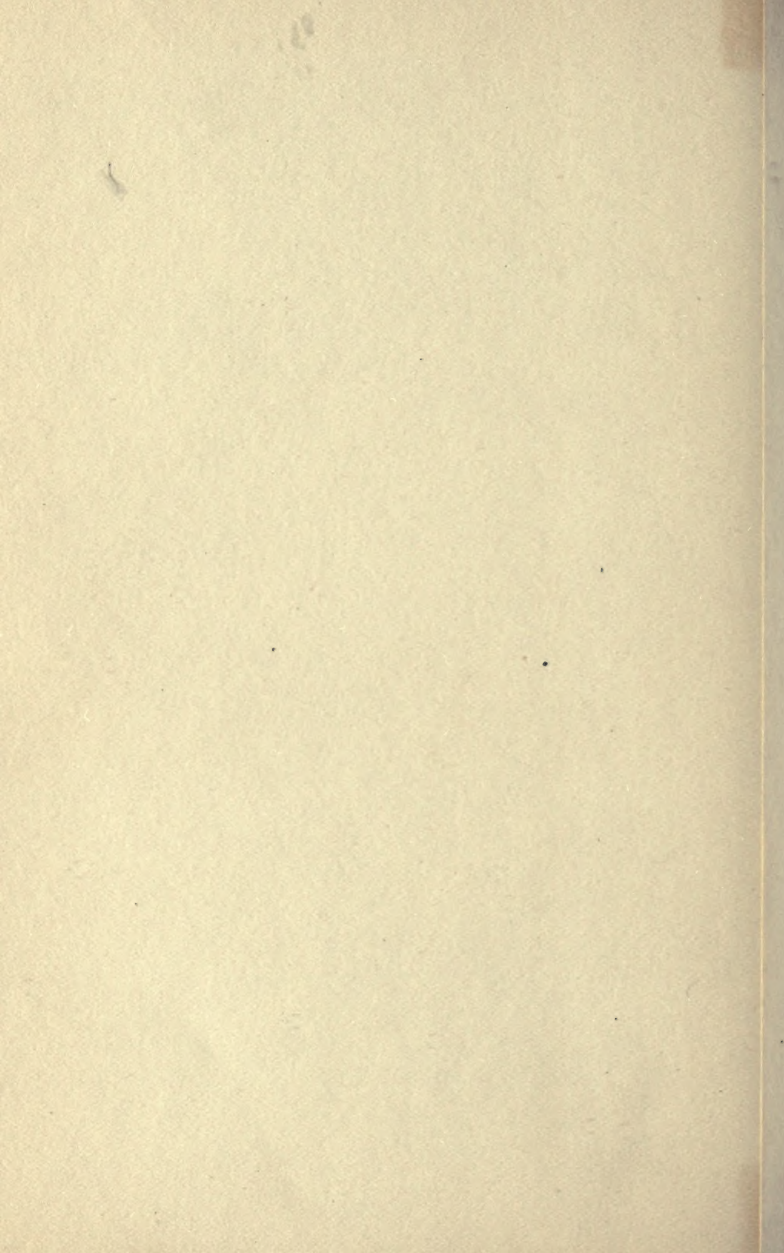
Stretching straight from the viewless Pit,
To the skies that are shamed because of it,
Lit with a blue and hungry fire,
That blasts like the breath of fulfilled Desire,
Glory and Shame in its secret hoards,
It stands supreme, the Ladder of Swords!

You must climb it? Aye, with all men born!
When? When you reel from the common scorn,
When utter Defeat has gripped you fast,
And your life goes down in the dark at last;
When the things you builded dissolve like mist,
And Love has broken his faith and trust,
And your body strains at the torturers' cords,
You have come at last to the Ladder of Swords!

Will you find a friend? One friend alone,
Flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone,
The last strange Courage that mocks Despair,
That hunts the wolf with the wounded hare,
That throws your life in the jaws of death
To snatch it back in a single breath.
Blinded no longer by pomp and words,
You shall go up stark to the Ladder of Swords!

Though your torn feet slip on the bloody steel,
Though your body faint and your senses reel,
Dizzied with agony, blind and numb,
You shall crawl the rungs till the end is come;
Though the sun flare out and the heavens crack,
Nor god nor devil can turn you back!
This is the prize that Defeat accords!
Courage! Courage! The Ladder of Swords!

Yes, by the gods! Caesar, the day is yours,
You rule the world— while you debauch the State.
Yet, somewhere, beyond all, there still endures,
That pure Republic: and its white walls shine,
Proudly, a dream no conquests can dispel.
Your hosts toil uselessly; no force can take
Those walls. Your legionaries break and break,
In vain. Ever, before each bleeding line,
It rises still, the Vision Invincible!



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Benét, Stephen Vincent
Five men and Pompey

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